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# Into the Fray

Frances Pearce  
faapearce@verizon.net

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## **Into the Fray**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Francie Pearce  
Bachelor of Arts, Art History and Classical Archaeology,  
Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, 1975

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
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## **Artist Statement**

My sculpture and prints are about dismemberment and the destruction caused by war. To address the high cost of war, I make works that present the threat of injury, amputation, and prosthetics. I use Classical Greek art history references to address contemporary political, military, and social issues. I include images such as Amazonian women, horses, and doves. These images are coupled with references to the damage caused by conflict.

While my work concerns destruction, paradoxically, my process involves additive construction. I take a mixed media approach to both my sculptures and my prints, and use a wide range of materials and techniques. Hardware cloth, wire, and abaca pulp are staples of my sculpture. Craft foam, copy paper, and feathers are often used for my printing plates. I use mixed media because it symbolically parallels the fabrication of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and the merging of human bodies with artificial limbs.

My work addresses war in general but some motifs point to specific, current conflicts. I hope that my pieces will remind the viewer of the terrible toll war takes, and make them question the meaning of winning a war.

## **Into the Fray**

### **Introduction**

I always remember being interested in art and being encouraged by my elementary teachers. In high school, art was no longer included among my college preparatory classes and I shifted my extracurricular activities to athletics. However, a trip to Greece and Turkey reaffirmed my interest in art, and in college I double-majored in art history and classical archaeology. I also competed on two intercollegiate sports teams. It was in the latter that I first experienced gender discrimination, which caused me to become a campus activist for women's sports. By graduation, my passions for art history, classical art, and athletics were securely established.

Archaeology drew me to my first job as a publications assistant for the Gordion Excavation at the University Museum in Philadelphia. Then, athletics pulled me to my next career as a college sports information director. When I left this position, I considered becoming an artist and took studio classes at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). However, marriage and motherhood delayed my creativity for a time, and later my focus shifted toward teaching art. With more coursework, I earned my teaching license in PreK-12 Art. I was an art teacher but did not consider myself a working artist.

To maintain my license, I took recertification courses offered by VCU's Off-Campus Graduate Art Program. It was in these classes that I finally regarded myself as an artist. As a result, I entered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program where I concentrated on sculpture and printmaking. This

program deepened and expanded my knowledge and skills. I discovered that I preferred constructive processes. However, my ideas were contradictorily connected to deconstruction, as seen in the devastation of war.

## **Aesthetics**

My work is primarily about dismemberment as a consequence of war. In addressing this idea I looked to historical evidence. For example, the Amazonian women of Ancient Greek mythology were reported to have amputated one of their breasts in order to be better archers. This horrifying self-mutilation underscored the reputation of the Amazons as fierce warriors. It also portrayed these women as *unnatural* human beings because battle *naturally* dismembers its participants, not the other way around. Contemporary war reports and stories about veterans provide frequent reminders of this fact. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) have caused much of this mutilation. My work addresses the cost of battle and attempts to include this idea within the definition of victory.

In my works that include references to the Amazons, I abstract and symbolize the warriors' bodies as one or two breasts and an archer's bow. Viewed from the side, the bows curve outward from their ends and are slightly indented at their midpoints where archers would grip them. Either side of center of the bow, I add a breast or breasts. These protrude as though seen in profile, and this sideways view suggests a bra. The breasts refer to the myth of their self-dismemberment. The bow emphasizes their aggressiveness. These are the features that I use to present Amazons to the viewer.

In my works that concern the Iraq War (2003-2010), I use an Arabian horse head to represent that country. I do this because Iraq is an Arab nation, and its former leader, Saddam Hussein (1937-2006), owned a large stable of Arabian horses. Our family owned a half-Arabian horse, which my daughter rode. Watching halter classes for the first time left an indelible picture in my mind. In these classes, young horses wearing only a halter attached to a lead are judged on how they look and behave. They are trained to stand with their heads up. To me, their necks seemed to be extended to the point of contortion. It looked unnatural. The colts and fillies looked dominated by human handlers. For me, this became a metaphor for the US invasion of Iraq. The horse head *is* Iraq. The halter and lead *are* the US.

Wings are another motif in my pieces. Doves are historically seen as symbols of peace. Noting that in some situations soldiers are referred to as peacekeepers, I decided to use wings as metaphors for peace. To show how peace is disrupted, I often attached prosthetic elements to broken wings.

In my works, I use a variety of materials that include sticks to indicate nature, as well as nails and scrap metal to indicate manmade objects. I also incorporate fabrics and thread. The manipulated, torn fabrics and frayed threads help me to relay the concepts of wear, tear, and damage.

## **Influences**

I attended a Friends, or Quaker, school from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Lessons on pacifism and social activism, especially as they coincided with the Viet Nam War and the Civil Rights Movement, made a deep impression on me. Further, I learned

that to participate in a war or protest it, and to accept the status quo or attempt to change it, are matters of individual conscience. At the time, I thought matters of war and peace were black and white. Later, I grew to think that they are decidedly complex shades of gray, as exemplified in my works relating to the Iraq War.

My Friends school education offered access to the gym, courts, and playing fields equally to boys and girls. So, it was a bitter awakening to discover that my college, like society in general, did not deem women worthy of such egalitarian opportunities. Fortunately, attitudes have changed a great deal since then. However, by contemporary Western standards, women are not so highly regarded in many cultures around the world. I intend my Amazon pieces to be evidence of both the existence of strong, athletic women and of remaining social norms against such existence.

My love of Greece and its ancient culture developed during a trip to Greece and Turkey. The opportunity to study this area in great depth proved irresistible. My collegiate curriculum immersed me in the carved and cast statuary, pottery, and culture of Ancient Greece. I learned that the word for Amazon, *Ἀμαζών*, meant without a breast. This was a definition tied closely to the myth of the warrior women, yet no statues or vase paintings showed Amazons in this manner. I began to look for examples of athletic girls and women in art, and in popular culture. I found few examples. It was then that I decided to create sculptures of physically strong women.

The wire sculpture of Alexander Milne Calder (1898-1976) influenced my choice of wire as a media. In his piece, *Josephine Baker IV* (c. 1928), a simple wire became a jaunty dancer. Below the undersized and smiling head, he exaggerated the length and



graceful curve of the arms, bent the body *contrapposto*, and spiraled the breasts like a pair of wacky eyes that echo the swirl of the belly. Though minimal for the purpose of abstraction, his lines are sizably expressive.

Calder also combined wire with other materials. The polychromatic *Constellation Mobile* (1943) was constructed with wood, wire, string, and paint. The more typically monochromatic *Vertical Foliage* (1941) was made of sheet metal, wire, and paint. Like Calder, I combine wire with other materials for characteristically monochromatic pieces. Like him, I prefer to simplify forms and exploit contour.

Lastly, the work of sculptor Deborah Butterfield (1949- ) inspired me in her use of found materials, and her series of horse sculptures. She often uses wood to connote that they are part of the natural world. Her work is also intended to show that horses are a species whose usefulness was drastically diminished in the last century. So, she uses discarded manmade materials to signify this reduction. An example is *Joseph* (1988) which was made of pieces of found steel that were welded together. Whereas Butterfield's horses are presented as individual animals, my horse heads are intended to symbolize a nation. I use small wooden sticks to convey the fragility of life in a country that is at war. I also reference IEDs when incorporating metal pieces with the fragile wood.

## **Sculpture**

The form I call *Amazon*, presented as an archer's bow with either one or two breasts either side of its midpoint, was the motif for my series of sculptures. In *Black Figure Amazon* (Appendix, 1), I used wire hardware cloth to construct the curved bow in

the round. I used a taut, smooth cord as the bowstring. I intended the curve to be a graceful one that would imply the grace of a warrior or an athlete, and the smooth texture of the cord to contrast with the rough, wire texture of the bow. Below the midpoint of the bow, I positioned one breast. Above the midpoint, I placed an empty circular form. I intended the resulting asymmetry to convey abnormality. The height of the piece is 72" and is intended to be proportional to a full-sized human.

I constructed the bow with hardware cloth that had a pronounced warp and weft pattern. To soften this geometry, I loosely wove fraying yarn through the wire fabric. Then, I poured abaca pulp over the yarn and wire form. As part of the process, gaps were left in the surface by the uneven application of the pulp. I intended these areas to suggest the exposure of the body below the skin as seen in open war wounds. For coloration, I sprayed black dye on the sculpture to refer to Classical Greek vase painting. I also wanted it to connote a dark, threatening form. While I spray painted the form as thoroughly as I could, there were areas that the white of the abaca showed through. These areas suggested ashes to me and the idea of destruction by fire, another consequence of battle.

*Halter Class/Iraq* (Appendix, 2) is a three-dimensional wall relief made of hardware cloth, sticks, nails, abaca pulp, chain, and leather. In scale, it is close to life-size of an Arabian horse head. I began the piece by placing sticks on hardware cloth in the outline of the horse's head. I angled the head back at slightly greater than ninety degrees to depict the notion of contortion. Next, I connected narrow arches of hardware cloth in six places from the base of the neck to the nose. With wire and jute, I attached sticks and nails to this framework. I intended the sticks to convey the natural landscape

of Iraq. Symbolic of IEDs, I wanted the nails to transmit the hostile landscape of that country at war. I poured abaca pulp over this construction in order to unify the elements but not to cover them entirely. Like *Black Figure Amazon*, I intended some of the metal pieces and nails inside the horse to be visible. I wanted this partial coverage to be reminiscent of desiccation. I used the abaca's natural sand color to remind the viewer of the Iraqi desert. Though I did not anticipate it, rust from some of the nails stained the abaca. As the hue was similar to that of dried blood, I left these stains in place.

Finally, to the jaw of the horse head I wired a chain representing the halter tack. I wired the other end of the chain to the buckle of a belt, which represented the lead. I used an old belt of my own. Its warm brown leather nearly matched the nails' rust-blood color. I intended its worn texture to convey the many years of the war. Finally, I extended the belt as taut as I could to show that the horse was being pulled. I meant this to convey the US attempt to control Iraq.

## **Printmaking**

In printmaking, I interpreted different aspects of the myth of the Amazon warriors. In the monoprint *Amazons* (Appendix, 3), I used a stencil of an Amazon with two breasts that I made out of copy paper. I printed this twice on a cardboard plate, once with yellow ink and once with red ink. I printed the yellow bow facing left, the red bow facing right, and the upper and lower shafts of their bows overlapping. I positioned the bows in opposition to create visual tension. Next, I cut out one breast from each bow, the upper breast of the yellow bow and the lower breast of the red bow. This process of cutting out a breast mimicked mastectomy. To draw attention to the missing

breasts, I placed a black matte board behind the paper. To the left of the bows, I drew a partial profile contour of a nude woman archer in black marker. Her left arm extends across the top of the print from her right fingers, which are bent as if she is pulling a bowstring. Finally, I sewed a black bowstring to each bow. The bowstring of the red bow touches the nipples of the drawn female figure and the yellow Amazon's missing breast. While I did not plan this juxtaposition, it serves to emphasize my intention to more clearly show the Amazonian myth.

In *Amazon Scouts* (Appendix, 4), I intended to show Amazons as young girls at play. I did this by cutting a long, lean bow figure with two breasts out of craft foam. I inked this four times and printed it, using a different color each time. I placed the curves of a green and an orange bow facing left. I placed the curves of a red and a yellow bow facing right. I wanted the opposing directions to create a compositional tension. In a similar vein, I intended the bowstrings to contrast the curves. I overlapped the bows at different heights and angles to create a visual rhythm and suggest motion. I wanted this image, made up of graceful, gender-specific curves, lively color, and movement, to connote the pleasure of sport.

In *Amazon/Arrows* (Appendix, 5), I intended to represent an Amazon in relation to battle. I did this by superimposing the central portion of an Amazon bow over a field of arrows. I began this piece by stitching the heads and shafts of arrows into a rectangle of polyester organza. I pointed the arrows in all directions as I imagined they might be in battle. I also left loose threads to indicate the fraying of uniforms, flesh, and nerves of those engaged in combat. In the next step, I applied a heat gun to the fabric to create holes and to distort the fabric and arrows. Destroying parts of the fabric and

the stitching was meant to parallel the destruction of war. I unevenly inked the fabric in black, which conveyed a charred, burnt look.

After creating the ground, I made the Amazon bow plate out of craft foam. I used red ink for this to suggest the blood of battle. The bow is longer than the fabric, and I positioned it to tilt to the left. The red ink is transparent and allows the viewer to see the damaged arrows underneath.

In printmaking, I was able to expand my narrative of the Amazon women. Because of the immediacy and multiplicity of monoprinting, I could experiment with color and shape. My use of thread and fabric influenced the expression of my ideas with mixed media.

## **Mixed Media**

By mixing media, I intended to elaborate on my Iraq War works. I chose to use two media to contrast victory in war with the human cost of war. In *Halter Class/Iraq: Hanging By Threads I* (Appendix, 6), I combined a textile process with sculpting. I began by drawing a map of Iraq, emphasizing the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in a rectangular piece of white polyester organza. I used the zigzag setting of my sewing machine to cover these lines with white thread to match the color of the organza. When I painted the surface with a textile hardener, the blue marker lines of the rivers bled. I secured the organza support to a window screen to hold the fabric taut and to minimize shrinking. Next, I created holes and warped some of the linear elements with a heat gun to represent a damaged country. Then, I painted sticks with white acrylic. I wired the sticks and small nails together in the shape of an Arabian horse's head. For the

halter and lead, I used the pull chain from a broken light fixture. Next, I sewed the relief sculpture to the fabric. I decided to attach the edges of the fabric to a larger wooden frame with hand sewn thread. I left loose ends of threads dangling to add to the frayed, damaged look of the piece. In this piece, I wanted to convey the instability of war torn Iraq.

*Peace Keeper/Piece Maker* (Appendix, 7) is a combination of printmaking and sculpture. I began by inking a gelatin plate a tint of blue. To this monoprint, I added inked blue feathers and arranged them on the plate in the shape of a dove's wing. Then, I assembled two large safety pins, a key ring, a large paper clip, and umbrella spines. I superimposed these on top of the wing shape and sewed the pieces onto the print. I intended these pieces of metal to echo the structure of the wing, such as a prosthetic device might use. I meant this mixed media work to convey the idea that a war may end but its damage persists.

In my mixed media, I have conveyed a definition of victory in war that includes the high price of victory. I wired together pieces from sharp, broken metal and contrasted these with organic forms. The contrast in materials is to show the vulnerability of the human body in the violent theater of war. While the metal parts of my horse sculptures are meant to represent IEDs, the prosthetic wing has a different import. While they stand out as evidence of the loss of limb, I also intend them to suggest the broken survivors of war. This survival is symbolized by a changed form, part natural and part unnatural. Men and women warriors are changed by their experiences when they enter into the fray.

## **Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program has given me the structure and experience to consider myself a working artist. The time required with respect to credit hours within a prescribed number of years enabled a more regular habit of art making. Instructors introduced me to new processes while allowing space to experiment. They exposed me to contemporary artists whose work related to my interests and added to my knowledge. I am especially grateful to the MIS-IAR faculty for the help and attention.

Working with other artist-teachers was also valuable especially when we shared issues about art instruction. Since most of us in the elementary school setting work in isolation, this was especially enriching. I can now more authentically communicate to my students what it means to be an artist because I understand it so much better myself. My studies have definitely made me a better teacher. I have used techniques learned in my classes for projects in my elementary classroom, and in professional development workshops for the K-12 art teachers in my school division.

During the MIS-IAR Program, my work has come a long way. It is now on a solid base from which I can move forward. I will continue to research the subjects that concern me and explore new techniques and presentations. Because of the MIS-IAR Program, I know that I can do this. Being an artist is no longer an aspiration, it is now an identity.

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## Appendix

### List of Figures

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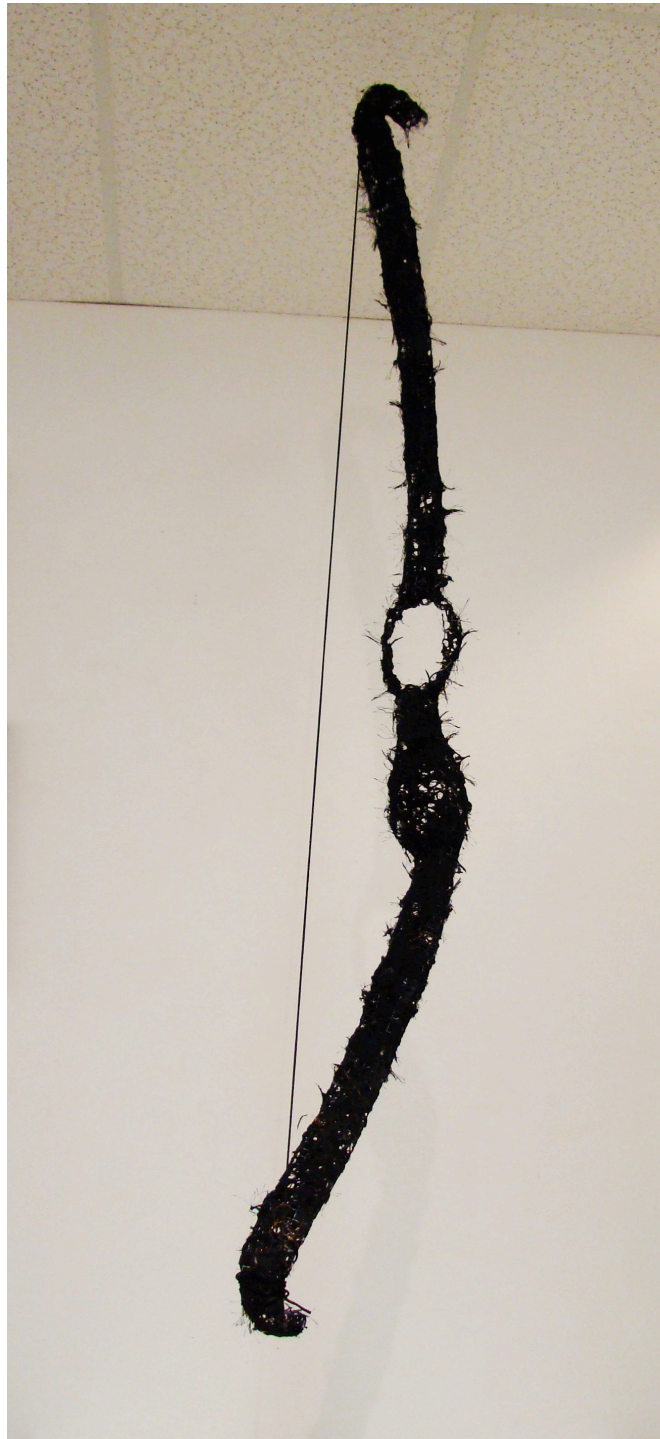


Figure 1. *Black Figure Amazon* (installation view), hardware cloth, yarn, abaca pulp, dye, cord, 72"x6"x15", 2014.



Figure 2. *Halter Class/Iraq*, hardware cloth, sticks, nails, wire, chain, belt, abaca pulp, 25.5"x68"x4", 2012.



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Figure 4. *Amazon Scouts*, monoprint with thread, 9.5"x5", 2014.





Figure 5. *Amazon/Arrows*, monoprint, 16"x9", 2014.

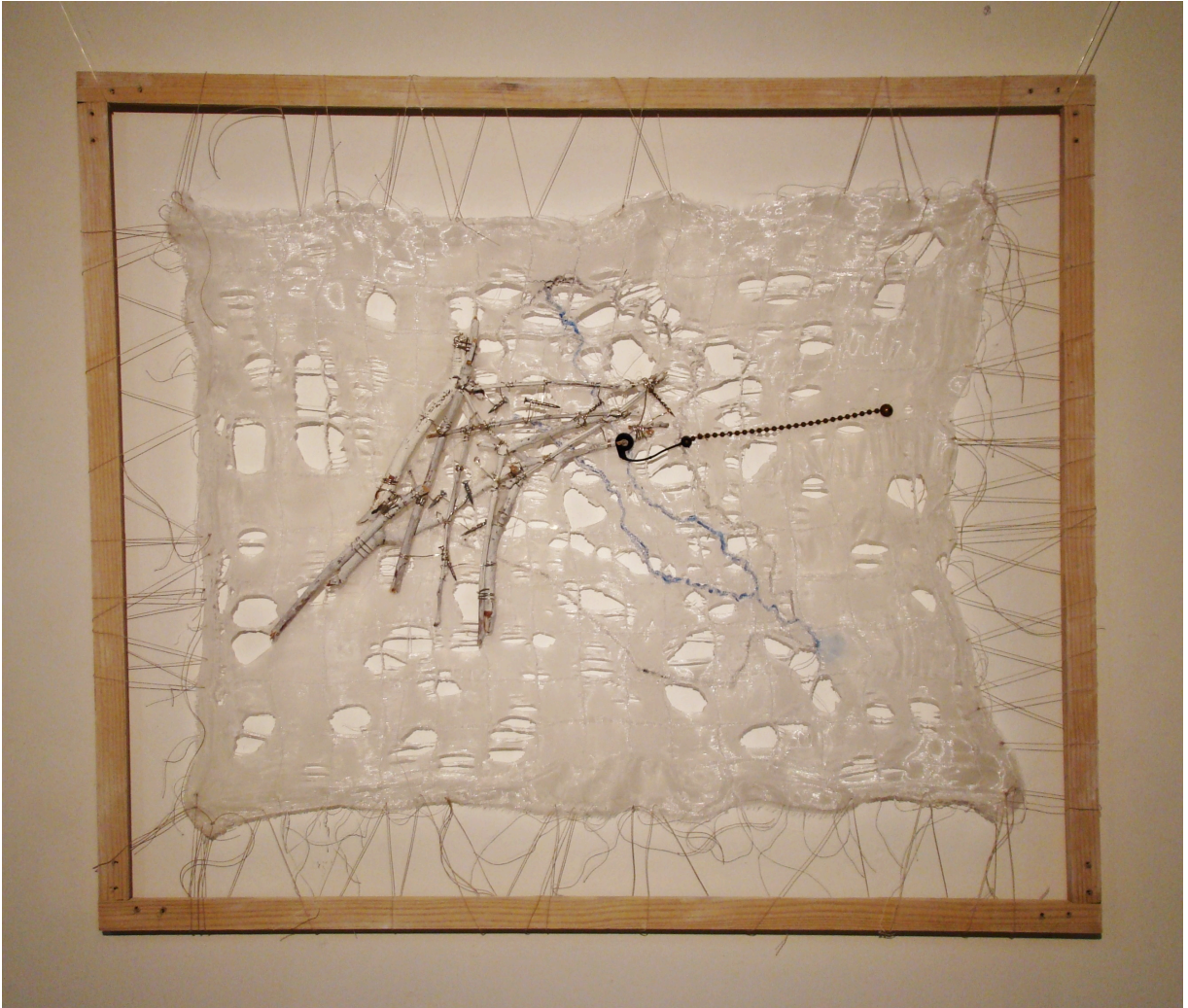


Figure 6. *Halter Class/Iraq: Hanging by Threads I*, mixed media, 20.5"x23.75"x 0.5", 2014.





Figure 7. *Peace Keeper/Piece Maker*, monoprint with wire assemblage, 6.25"x10.5"x.25", 2014.



## Francie Pearce

### Education:

- 2015 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Focus Areas: Sculpture and Printmaking
- 1975 Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Classical Archaeology, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio

### Other Education:

- 2001 Attended Thomas Nelson Community College, Hampton, Virginia
- 1986-87 Attended Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 1977-82 Attended Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### Teaching and Related Experience:

- 2012-Present Elementary Art Lead, Newport News Public Schools, Newport News, Virginia
- 2002-Present Art Teacher, Carver Elementary School, Newport News, Virginia
- 2001-02 Part-time Art Teacher, Keystone Academy, Newport News, Virginia
- 1999-2002 Teacher Education Program, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia
- 1987-89 Part-time worker, Hilton Village Gallery and Hilton Gallery, Newport News, Virginia
- 1975-79 Publications Assistant, Gordion Excavation Publications, University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### Publications:

Pearce, Frances, "R. Tait McKenzie: Women, Sport and Sculpture." *Sport and the Humanities: A Collection of Original Essays*, Edited by William J. Morgan, Knoxville, Tennessee, The Bureau of Educational Research and Service, College of Education, University of Tennessee, 1982, pp. 37-50. Paper presented at the R. Tait McKenzie Symposium on Sport and the Humanities, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1981.

**Professional Organizations or Memberships:**

2000-Present      National Art Education Association, Reston, Virginia

**Professional Organizations or Memberships (continued):**

2001-Present      National Education Association, Washington, DC

1987-Present      Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia

**Exhibitions:**

2015      *Into the Fray*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at Downing Gross Cultural Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia

2014      *Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association: Beyond the Classroom*, Downing Gross Cultural Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia

*Artists Who Teach Juried Exhibition*, Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, Virginia. Juror: Jeffrey Allison

2013      *Artists Who Teach Juried Exhibition*, Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, Virginia. Juror: David Johnson

*Faculty Show*, Newport News Public Schools Administration Building, Newport News, Virginia

2012      *Artists Who Teach Juried Exhibition*, Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, Virginia. Juror: Amy Brandt

*Faculty Show*, Newport News Public Schools Administration Building, Newport News, Virginia

2011      *Faculty Show*, Falk Gallery, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia

2009      *Artists Who Teach Juried Exhibition*, Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, Virginia. Juror: Ed Gibbs

*Faculty Show*, Ferguson Center for the Arts, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia

2003      *Artists Who Teach Exhibition*, Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, Virginia